Wagner, Schopenhauer, and the Orient

“My sleep is dreaming, my dreaming brooding, my brooding the mastery of knowledge.” With this sentence, Erda addresses the Wanderer in the final act of Siegfried, and her words resonate with the Eastern practice of meditation in the pursuit of wisdom.

Richard Wagner’s interest in the East had been stimulated by his brother-in-law, the orientalist Hermann Brockhaus, who had married Ottilie Wagner in 1836. It was the Brockhaus family firm that had first published Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophical masterpiece The World as Will and Representation, a work destined to make a profound impression on the composer.

Schopenhauer’s knowledge of the Hindu Upanishads and Buddhist scriptures dated from the end of 1813, by which time he had formulated many of his own insights from the vantage point of Western philosophy. Nevertheless, he relished the discovery that his views had much in common with key doctrines of Hinduism and Buddhism.

There is an interesting parallel here in the relationship between Wagner’s ideas and Schopenhauer’s writings. The impact of those writings on the composer sprang less as a direct source of ideas but from the fact that they seemed to confirm and clarify notions that were already apparent to him, though difficult to explain. Wagner first read The World as Will and Representation in 1854, and found in it a coherent explanation of his treatment of Wotan. His intention had been to show nothing less than the breaking of the god’s proud spirit by, what Schopenhauer would call, the annihilation of the will—the negation of compulsive striving and yearning that leads inevitably to disappointment and pain. The Buddha would have called it the renunciation of craving and desire which lies at the root of suffering.

During the last three decades of his life, Wagner demonstrated a serious interest in the two great religions of India. He cited contemporary research suggesting that Buddhist ideas had flowed westward after the spread of Alexander’s empire to the Indus in 327 B.C., and had influenced Christian doctrine (a view shared by Schopenhauer). This notion shaped Parsifal which, despite its overtly Christian setting, is replete with Buddhist imagery. Tristan und Isolde contains echoes of both Buddhism and the Upanishads.

For Wagner, Buddhism was not remote from German thought but in harmony with it, something that was demonstrated in one splendid musical passage composed for his unfinished Buddhist opera, Die Sieger (The Victors). This music ended up in Siegfried. According to Cosima Wagner’s diaries, it had been written for the Buddha himself. The phrase in question is first heard in the Wanderer’s final scene with Erda. He wants her to tell him how to stop a turning wheel, but she cannot help him. In Buddhist teachings, the turning wheel of Karma is the inexorable working out of the consequences of one’s actions. After a pause, the Wanderer tells Erda that he is no longer concerned about the end of the gods and, in fact, consciously wills it. We then hear in the orchestra the so-called “world inheritance” theme once intended for the Buddha.

The most significant Buddhist influence on the Ring came in 1856 with a revised text for the closing scene of Götterdämmerung when Brünnhilde, made wise through suffering and love, refers to herself as the “enlightened one.” Eventually though, words proved inadequate, and Wagner left it to the orchestra alone to articulate the sublime ending to the whole drama.

Having acquired the ring illegally and immorally, Wotan is also destined to lose it. In order to satisfy the contractual claims of the giants, Fasolt and Fafner, builders of Valhalla, he reluctantly parts with the ring, doing so at the behest of the earth goddess Erda, a figure drawn not from Norse mythology but from the classical world. Interestingly, she doesn’t say: “Give back the ring and the gods will be saved.” It’s already too late for that. Instead, she says: “All that exists will end”—have nothing to do with the ring. So now Wotan has been warned, the wheel of destiny is turning. In the third act of Siegfried, he will ask Erda directly how to stop this turning wheel, but she will have no answer.

By the mid-1850s, Wagner had become a very different man from the starry-eyed revolutionary of his Dresden years. He encountered the writings of Schopenhauer which matched his mood perfectly and gave him an intellectual framework for the remainder of his life’s work (see accompanying article). This radically changed perspective took hold in the second act of Die Walküre, especially with the character of Wotan. But Der Ring des Nibelungen remains a drama of human frailty, its message a universal one of love and life. By the end of Rheingold, the stage is set for a struggle involving passionate love and, ultimately, compassionate love which, in Götterdämmerung and Parsifal, will be revealed as humanity’s last best hope.


Scenes from the Life of Buddha (painted textile), Tibetan School / Musée Guimet, Paris

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